



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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At the Name of Jesus

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Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

The story begins long ago and far away, but also as close as the kingdom of God, which draws so near that it can find its way to the center of our souls.

The one true God lives in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the connection between them is love. Not a soft and sentimental love, but a love so strong that it overflows in creative power, vast enough to bring whole worlds into being.

Love requires a lover and a beloved, so love has its beginning, like every other good thing, in this God who is three in one. Jesus embodies that love as a Son devoted to his faithful Father, but of course these are only human analogies for a connection far deeper than we can imagine.

Jesus was with the Father from the beginning of time. When God spoke a Word to bring the world into being, that Word was the Logos, the logic behind all creation, and the Word was also the Son.

Billions of years went by, as we reckon time, until

human beings emerged at last on Earth. And then, in the fullness of time, God became like us so that we could become more like God, free from sin and fit for eternal life. The Son emptied himself of just enough divinity so that he could fit into human form, and he came into this world the same way the rest of us do, as a little child. In this incredible act of humility Jesus showed us what real power looks like—the power of God to make all things new.

One day, the Scripture says, when his redeeming work is done, every knee will bend in heaven and on earth at the name of Jesus. But not yet. Not this week, which will come to be called Holy Week. This week, people will respond in all sorts of ways to the name of Jesus.

The chief priests and the scribes, the men in charge of the religious establishment, want to do away with Jesus, precisely because he goes around acting as though he's altogether too close to God. Jesus tells people that their sins are forgiven, which is something only God can do. He breaks the Sabbath traditions, as if he ruled the Sabbath, and not the other way around. And the people respond to him as if he had authority wrapped around his own person, unlike the artificial authority that comes with fancy titles. At the name of Jesus, the chief priests and scribes are driven in fear and fury to plots of homicide.

Meanwhile, in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, a woman hears that Jesus is coming to dinner at Simon's house, so she fetches a jar of precious ointment, the most valuable thing she has, and makes her way to where Jesus is sitting and pours the whole thing out on him. She does it out of sheer gratitude and joy because, as Luke tells the story, she's been what the priests and scribes would call a "sinner"—though now she's one of those whom Jesus has

told that their sins are forgiven. People will look back on what she's done and say that she was anointing him for what was about to happen. But she knows nothing of that now. All she knows is that she's found forgiveness and grace and peace at the name of Jesus.

For Judas Iscariot, the name of Jesus brings turmoil and confusion. He's followed Jesus all this time, but Jesus has not lived up to his expectations. Whatever he thought was going to happen—a dramatic new age inaugurated by the Messiah, the overthrow of the Romans, some sort of personal glory for himself and the other disciples—it hasn't turned out that way. Judas followed Jesus, but always with a divided heart, and now that things aren't going the way he wants, maybe the authorities will be interested in what he can offer them. He can give them Jesus, alone at night, without that Palm Sunday crowd to get in the way. So Judas hands Jesus over to the powers that be. In a few more days the name of Jesus will become a torment for Judas, and the thirty pieces of silver he made on the deal will not be nearly enough to make his life feel worthwhile.

Peter, on the other hand, summons all his impetuous bravado at the name of Jesus. He promises that, no matter what these other men do, the Master can count on him, come what may. Come Thursday night, though, Jesus calls Peter, James, and John to wait with him in the garden while he pours out his heart to the Father, only to find them sleeping when he needs them all the most. Later that night, when the name of Jesus comes up around the campfire outside the high priest's house, Peter will deny that he ever knew Jesus. Not once, but again and again, with increasing vehemence until, by the third time, at the name of Jesus the cock will crow and Peter the Rock will crumble and weep for all the courage that he lacks.

At the name of Jesus a band of men with swords come out to find him and haul him off to the priests and the council. One of Jesus' followers draws his own sword and lops off the ear of the high priest's slave, as if some small act of violence might make things right. But when the briefest battle in history, the Battle of Gethsemane, is lost in an instant, the whole band of followers flees in fear. One of them, a young man wearing only a linen cloth, is caught by his clothing, but he gets loose and runs away naked into the night. Some say that young man was John, the beloved disciple who, decades later, would tell the world how Jesus was the very Son of God, the Word through whom creation itself was made.

At the name of Jesus that night, the high priest hears only blasphemy from a man who needs to be taught the difference between himself and God. The priest wants to preserve his own authority, over and against this pretender. And he wants to keep peace with the Romans, who are only too quick to quell any sign of religious rebellion. The high priest tells his colleagues it's necessary that one man should die for the sake of the people, and the high priest is right, but not for the reason he thinks.

That same night, the name of Jesus brings mostly just another headache for Pontius Pilate. The governor is both amused and annoyed by these provincial squabbles. Still, there's something unusual about Jesus, something deep. And Pilate's wife had a dream about him, warning Pilate to be careful. All of this prompts Pilate to ask, "What is truth, after all?" But this brief philosophical moment gives way quickly to political expediency. "I find no fault with him," Pilate says. "Whom shall I release to you: Jesus, or Barabbas the thief?" he asks, thinking this should be an easy choice. But the crowd cries out, "Give us Barabbas!" So

Pilate washes his hands of the whole affair and hands Jesus over to be crucified.

The next morning, a man named Simon of Cyrene is drafted to carry a cross out to the place they call “the Skull,” because by now Jesus has been beaten so badly that he can’t bear the weight of it himself. From this day on, the name of Simon will be forever tied to the name of Jesus, as the first person literally to do what Jesus asks all his disciples to do figuratively—namely, to take up our cross and follow him, so that in losing our old life we might find new life in him.

A few years later, the name of Jesus will send a man called Saul on a hunting expedition. He’ll be on a mission to stamp out the movement that’s grown up around Jesus, but the Lord who already conquered death will conquer Saul’s heart, too. Saul will become known as Paul, and then one day, sitting in prison for sake of him whose movement he set out to destroy, Paul will tell how, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

One day that will happen, if the gospel message is true. In the meantime, people respond in all sorts of ways when they hear the name of Jesus.

Some are hostile, and want to do away with him – or at least with that community of followers, the church, that grew up around his name.

Others are simply indifferent. They’re willing to believe that Jesus was a good man with some helpful hints for living, as long as he doesn’t make any real claim on their lives that might interfere with other priorities.

Some people are hostile or indifferent to Jesus, and the last thing they want is for him to make much difference in the way they live. But other people hear in the name of Jesus the answer to the deepest longing of their hearts. They find forgiveness for their sins, like the woman with the ointment. Or like Peter they eventually find the courage they need to face the future and all their fears. They find peace to calm their anxious hearts, and a commitment to care for others as Jesus has cared for them.

One day, Paul says, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. In the meantime, the question Holy Week poses for each of us is this: How do you respond at the name of Jesus, and how far are you willing to follow him?



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